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The position of the PTA on issues relating to reading instruction is stated. Support for good literature is emphasized, and the topic of censorship is discussed. The methods of teaching reading are seen to involve teachers and other reading professionals, but the right to expect sound reading instruction is viewed as a basic right of the parents. The PTA's responsibility of bringing to its members accurate information about the various approaches to reading instruction is pointed out. The role of the parents and their influence on their children's reading is emphasized. Continued PTA support of school and public libraries is declared, and its advocation of book fairs is stated. The misuse of beginning readers is noted, and the right of expression in regards to quality of textbooks is clearly stated. (RT)

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THE PTA AND READING INSTRUCTION

That Johnny and Sue should learn to read, and read well, has been a prime goal of the PTA since its beginnings in 1897. We have always recognized that in the race of life, he who runs must read. We have always worked to assure each child this right and privilege.

At the second convention of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (then the National Congress of Mothers), in 1898, Mrs. Mary H. Weeks of this very city, Kansas City, Missouri, told the assembled parents that "Children love to read stories, because they wish to identify themselves with the world. . . . They wish to know that they may be." Seventy-one years ahead of time, she was anticipating this year's slogan for National Library Week: "Be all you can be--read."

This deep concern of the PTA with children's reading has not lessened through the years. Rather it has been strengthened and deepened by experience, by advances in child psychology, and specifically by the growth of scientific knowledge in the area of reading. Moreover, we have given our energies to spreading and implementing this concern until now almost every parent in the land, no matter how underprivileged his own childhood may have been, when he sends his child to school wants above all else that he shall learn to read. The sorry thing is that for many parents this wish remains unrealized.

Indeed the militance of disadvantaged parents often stems from anxiety over their children's lack of reading ability. The parents who rioted in New York and other cities over the inadequacy of their children's schools were not, for the most part, protesting discrimination or crowded classes or outmoded buildings or inadequate equipment. They were protesting the sheer fact that their children weren't learning to read. In a real sense, then, the crisis in big-city education looms largely as a reading crisis. What's more, it's a crisis we're likely to be facing for some time. Many remedies have been offered, but we haven't had time yet to find out which of them is the right one. And the parents have become impatient. They want Johnny and Sue to learn to read now. Who can blame them? They are afraid, and rightly so, that their children will be cut off from earning a decent living and thereby doomed to the poverty and futility that have frustrated their own lives. They are terrified to think that maybe it will be only in the next generation, or the one after that, or one still further postponed, that all normal children will be taught to read.

One doesn't have to be a disadvantaged parent to appreciate this kind of anxiety. We know, as you know, that nothing in the multi-media mix is yet as powerful as a book that appeals to a child's intelligence and emotions. Yet far too many children of school age are deprived of the ideas and experiences that lie within books by the inability to read. Call this dyslexia or any other term, it is a block to learning that we cannot and must not tolerate. Any child who cannot read at his level of development is an impoverished child, thwarted and hampered--a likely candidate for a desperate and defeated adulthood.

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Fortunately, a national assessment of education, which includes assessment of reading ability, is already under way. Moreover, every month, if not every week, there is some national conference going on at which professional people and laymen are coping with reading problems as well as with such issues as funding education, decentralization, and community control. Parent participation is a very important element in these discussions. Whatever role parents play in improving education, whether as paraprofessionals or as volunteer laymen, this much is clear: Parents have the largest stake in education. What concerns them most of all--affluent parents as well as the disadvantaged--is that every child be given the kind of reading instruction and instructional materials that will produce the best results.

As the largest voluntary organization in the United States, presenting a cross section of American parents, the National PTA obviously reflects this concern. It realizes that educational inequities exist and that the schools are failing too many of our children--that is, failing to meet their needs. It realizes that some teachers and some librarians are not doing all they can to turn children into proficient readers. It also realizes fully that some parents are not doing all they can to prepare their children for reading, the skill on which all learning depends. And I'm not thinking of illiterate, disaffected, or discouraged parents but of those who know better and can do better. That is why I share Elizabeth Hendryson's enthusiasm for this perspectives conference on the parent and reading, and why I feel so privileged to have this opportunity to talk with you.

Obviously, only if a boy or girl has progressed to a certain competence in reading can he hope to advance in his lifework. But the PTA wants more for children than just the practical advantages of reading. It wants youngsters to know the lifetime joy that comes from a continuous acquaintance with books. When a child learns to read well, he lays up a vast store of lasting, deeply satisfying, inexpensive enjoyment for life. It takes less than a dollar to buy paperbacks that nourish every hobby and answer every curiosity. It takes no money at all to use the inexhaustible resources of the public library, to own one's first and most important credit card, a library card. Reading is a pleasure that never grows flat, unprofitable and stale. The rewards of reading only become richer throughout life.

Thus one of the things the PTA wants for all young people is that they be introduced to <u>good</u> literature and have ready access to it. To hark back again to our beginnings, this is what Hamilton W. Mabie of New York City told the mothers (and some fathers too) who attended the first meeting of our organization in 1897: "No greater good fortune can befall a child than to be born into a home where the best books are read, the best music interpreted, and the best talk enjoyed, for in these privileges the richest educational opportunities are supplied."

Seven years later, Mrs. Theodore W. Birney, founder of the National PTA, wrote a book called <u>Childhood</u>. This book included a chapter on "Reading for Children," in which she pointed out how much reading can mean to a child and recommended lists of children's books that had been prepared by the Literature Committee of our organization. She took the quite modern view

that it is an injustice to children to limit their reading to so-called children's books. "While there are many good books written especially for children," she said, "they have as much right as their elders to the best books in the world." She also made a point of the importance of having a good encyclopedia in the home.

The PTA has always deplored efforts to corrupt the intelligence and spirit of the young by disseminating among them books, magazines, comic books, films, and radio and TV programs that tend to foster a taste for violence, obscenity, materialism, and disregard for the rights of others. A statement by Dr. Walter L. Hervey of New York City at that first meeting of ours in 1897 could just as well, I regret to note, have been made today:

> The crime of our day against childhood is . . . the placing before it of the local, the petty, the commonplace, and the distorted. There are publishers who each year place before an undiscriminating public attractive books for children, in which charming pictures are unequally yoked with inane reading matter. . . . They present no "view of life," and are [written] in language which has no literary merit, and which is often distinctly bad.

In the interest of better literature for children the members at this 1897 meeting passed a resolution against literature, billboards, and all other forms of communication that work evil on "the inner developing life of imagery."

In recent years the National PTA, for obvious reasons, has been drawn into the critical arena of young people's freedom to read. As you are all painfully aware, every now and then some irate parent takes issue with teachers who have assigned certain books either for class reading or for reading at leisure. In many instances it isn't a <u>contemporary</u> book that creates the ruckus. James R. Squire and Robert F. Hogan of the National Council of Teachers of English, in an article they wrote for <u>The PTA Magazine</u> a few years ago, give us further insight into parents' objections to books that teachers have included in their book lists. I quote:

> In the files of the National Council of Teachers of English are reports of efforts to ban <u>Robin Hood</u>, because it advocates sharing the wealth and is therefore Communistic; <u>The Scarlet Letter</u>, because it deals with adultery; <u>The King and I</u>, because it mentions a concubine; a short account of the life of Plato, because he advocated something like free love; the <u>Odyssey</u>, because this book from the ninth century B.C. is "non-Christian." One quality of a good book is having something to say. Do not most such books offend someone in some way? If we ban all books that offend anyone, what will be left to read?

A very valid question indeed. Although the National PTA does not have a policy statement on censorship, we do have several resolutions on pornography as it affects children and youth. These hard-hitting statements make good reading. If anyone wants copies of them, just give me your name and address and I'll see that they are sent to you. As for censorship, first let me say that the books <u>adults</u> should read we gladly leave to their conscience, taste, and, I

suppose, to what the Supreme Court of the United States considers prurient. But the question that troubles us greatly is this: Should we and can we censor what our children read?

My answer can be summed up as follows: One, we couldn't censor our children's reading, even if we wanted to. Two, the best thing parents can do is to build good literary taste in children from the day they start to read or be read to. And three, if the student's right to read is not to be put in jeopardy, parents no less than teachers and librarians must be involved in developing the best possible program of literature for children and young people. As Drs. Squire and Hogan have pointed out, "Teachers and librarians in the National Council of Teachers of English look to the National PTA and its local units for joint efforts to reach a common goal--a future generation of adults, solidly grounded in their tradition but not confined to it, intelligently curious, brave enough to ask questions, and wise enough to seek solutions. . . . The Council knows that no single teacher, no solitary librarian left to fight alone against individual censors or pressure groups can long maintain a broad and solid program in literature. Only with the cooperation of interested parents can the profession work in a climate conducive to this growth."

Certainly most parents do not consider themselves literary experts. Even if some of us were, we still wouldn't have the right to dictate to English teachers what books their students should read. This is a professional prerogative, and the PTA would not think of usurping it.

So are the teaching methods that teachers choose to use in their classrooms. We have a right, however, to expect that our children will learn to read easily, with understanding, and with pleasure and profit. As to what method should be followed to arrive at this happy result, that is a professional question to be answered by professionals--that is, teachers.

This brings up two issues in reading instruction that have been hot for more than a decade and show no signs of cooling off. The first has to do with the word versus phonic method, or "look-say" versus "decoding"; the second with whether children barely past babyhood should be taught to read. I should also mention i/t/a, the method a number of people claim to be highly successful in teaching children to read and write. It isn't my intention to deal with the pros and cons of these issues or to tip my PTA hand one way or the other. The reason I mention them is to make clear the policy of the National PTA in such controversial matters. In the field of reading instruction it is our function, as the PTA conceives it, to bring PTA members accurate information about <u>various</u> approaches to reading instruction, and encourage sound discussion of these approaches. In this case, the more sound, the less fury. Through <u>The PTA Magazine</u> and other PTA channels we have kept our members posted on new trends and experiments in reading instruction and what reading authorities think about them.

For example, Dr. Jeanne Chall's <u>Learning To Read: The Great Debate</u>* wasn't off the presses more than a few weeks before William D. Boutwell gave PTA members a comprehensive report on the book in <u>The PTA Magazine</u>. And similarly in past years we discussed other books that stirred up controversy about whether Jerry (you thought I would say Johnny, didn't you?) could read. To return to the

*McGraw-Hill, 1968.

Chall book, Mr. Boutwell urged PTA members not only to read it carefully but to discuss it at PTA meetings. To assure an informed and impartial discussion, he suggested recruiting the assistance of a professor of education, one specializing in reading, from a nearby university. It's exciting to speculate on how many people, as a result of PTA effort, increased their vocabulary with such beginning-reading terms as phonemes and graphemes, reversals, norms, and, of course, decoding.

Yes, in the beginning is the word, not only for children but for all of us engaged in lifelong learning. One thing is a certainty, not a speculation: The National PTA has helped the general public understand that many skillful classroom teachers, instead of limiting themselves to one method, actually combine several of the best methods in their teaching of reading.

As for parents' teaching toddlers to read, I well recall that when our official magazine published an article by Glenn J. Doman entitled "Little Children Can Learn To Read," there was quite a clamor from the opposition that their side should be given equal time. It was. The controversy rages on, and the only confusion I would add to it is this: If a child shows a desire to read early, nothing and no one on earth should--or rather, can--stop him from learning to read. However, if Johnny and Sue keep busy and happy at other pursuits, no parent or preschool teacher should deflect them from these pursuits by plunking them down in front of a talking typewriter or any other mechanical device still in the experimental stage. In your hands, dear partners in the educative process, we parents leave the early or later reading problem. But be sure to let us know--and earlier rather than later--when you have reached a consensus.

On the other hand, we of the National PTA do continuously urge that children be exposed to books just as soon as their eyes and hands can identify them. If we were to isolate the single factor that differentiates between early and late readers, it would not be IQ, but rather exposure to books. This fact has been documented repeatedly--and most clearly by Dolores Durkin. Hence the home can do no better for the school than to assure the child an abundance of books.

The PTA knows well that it is primarily up to parents whether their children become good readers and whether they enjoy reading. One way of accomplishing both these aims is the practice of family reading. The bedtime read-aloud story, with Mother and child eagerly looking at the bright pictures, actually serves many developmental purposes. Almost a century ago Mrs. Birney, in her book Childhood, recommended the habit of reading aloud for an hour or two several evenings during the week as "a strong bond for holding a family together."

I hope everybody here knows that The PTA Magazine has published countless articles underscoring the role of parents in reading readiness as well as advising them how to select suitable books for children and giving lists of good books both classic and modern. I hasten to add that parents throughout the country are grateful to Ruth Gagliardo for her outstandingly helpful children's book pages which appear monthly in The PTA Magazine.

It stands to reason that the PTA, from the day it was founded, has been a strong advocate of both school libraries and public libraries. The National PTA Committee on Reading and Library Service was created in 1898, one of the earliest of the national committees. It is no accident that the successive national chairmen of this committee have done so much for children's reading. They have all been exceptional workers in fields related to books and reading.

One of these exceptional persons is the National PTA president, Elizabeth Hendryson, who some years ago served as national chairman of the Committee on Reading and Library Service. At the 1957 joint meeting of the National Congress and the International Reading Association Mrs. Hendryson summarized the role of the PTA in promoting library service and in making parents aware of the value of reading. She told how some PTA's work directly with children. For example, they sponsor summer reading programs for boys and girls. Or, where there are no libraries or book stores, PTA's borrow collections of children's books from state and regional libraries or draw up lists of places from which books may be ordered. They work to get bookmobiles so as to bring books to all children. They also set up parent education discussion groups on children's literature and storytelling, conducted in cooperation with local public libraries. And, of course, they promote the formation of good home libraries by arranging book exhibits and book fairs--all part of the home's reinforcement of reading instructions.

Since confusion arises occasionally about PTA policy on book fairs, it might not be amiss to review the criteria set up by the National PTA to govern book fairs sponsored by local PTA's: (1) Book fairs in local communities should be developed jointly by the PTA, school and public libraries, and bookstores within the community. (2) Selection of books should follow the standards recommended by professional librarians and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. (3) The practice of making books available for purchase at these fairs is not considered a violation of the noncommercial policy, if selections are not limited to one publisher or one store in the community (where there are several stores). (4) Not fund raising for the PTA treasury but bringing a selection of good books to the attention of parents, teachers, children, and other citizens should be the objective of the book fair.

On a national scale it has been the PTA's constant policy to support public libraries. Our representatives have appeared before various governmental agencies to advocate increases in library budgets. The Library Services and Construction Act, passed by Congress in 1966, was a national project of the PTA for the ten years that it took to get it passed.

The PTA has always been a strong advocate of school libraries as well. The Board of Managers issued a statement in 1963 advocating the establishment in each elementary school of an adequate central school library under the guidance of a professionally trained librarian.

PTA members have provided important aid to school libraries in both elementary schools and high schools by doing everything from mending old books and helping to catalog new ones to checking out books and manning the school library during the summer so that children will have a handy source of books for their vacation reading.

A nationwide project initiated in 1965 deserves special mention. I refer to our Books for Appalachia project, which the National PTA undertook when the Office of Economic Opportunity asked us to assume leadership in providing books for the one- and two-room schools in the far reaches of the Appalachian Mountains, where schoolchildren were almost without books and magazines. If the need hadn't been so urgent and we could have taken more time in developing certain aspects of the project, undoubtedly we would have done some things differently. But so much for hindsight. When the project started we set our sights on furnishing them with about one million volumes. By the end of 1965 PTA's had provided 1,100,000 books of many kinds: reference works such as atlases, encyclopedias, dictionaries; supplementary subject material; new, imaginative textbooks; poetry; picture books--all for children of varying ages. In addition, we had built 12,882 bookcase-boxes that were used as carriers for the books and then as bookshelves in the schools.

Now what about the textbooks used in schools? Do we parents have a right to our say about the quality of the textbooks? I think so. I think parents have a right to demand that the readers through which a child enters the world of books be logically and coherently written, however simple they may be. We have a right to demand that the content not be so silly, flat, and boring that children are repelled or confused by it, or persuaded that reading can never be exciting or fascinating. If some of the greatest books in the world have been written for children, surely some of the worst have also been written for this innocent captive audience. It remains for parents who care about the quality of education to insist that beginning-readers everywhere will bring reading pleasure as well as profit to their young users.

In 1963 the National Board of Managers, mindful of the need for community involvement in the curriculum, pointed out that "consultations with parents relative to the selection of textbooks may be desirable and useful to the authorities responsible for the textbook selection." The PTA, the statement goes on to point out, fully recognizes that authority to select textbooks rests by law with state or local educational agencies, and is usually delegated to the professional staff of the school system. Selection of textbooks is guided by certain policies that define the responsibilities of the school board and of such other persons as the board wishes to involve in the selection process. "Therefore," the statement concludes, "it is appropriate for a PTA, if invited by the proper authorities, to be represented in the reviewing of textbooks or on committees created to advise textbook selection agencies. The PTA should not itself set up a reviewing committee," since this would be contrary to the noninterference policy of the National PTA.

I must not fail to mention the current PTA Action Program, Growing Up in Modern America,* with its conclusive evidence of our involvement in children's reading. Let me quickly give you one for instance. The first priority listed in the Action Program is improving your school. PTA's are urged to hold meetings at which the principal and members of the school staff describe the school program and to base these meetings on a survey of what parents want to know about their school. Six examples of what they want to know are cited, and two out of the six deal with reading and instructional materials.

*Growing Up in Modern America: A Plan of Action for Parent-Teacher Citizens. National PTA, 1968.

After this discussion of the PTA and Reading Instruction, I hardly need to assure you that the National PTA is ready, by tradition and conviction, by its policy and by its practice, to work with you teachers in every way in enabling children to read and read well, so they may truly become all that they can be.

If the PTA should sum up in a single resolution its whole view of that liberator of the mind that we call reading, our imaginary resolution might read like this:

WHEREAS, We believe that in the beginning was the word and that mastery of the word is essential to the development of the human species; and

WHEREAS, We believe that books are "spiritual antennas" by which children can reach out and make contact with their world and the most creative minds that have ever lived in it; and

WHEREAS, We believe that books enable a child's imagination to soar off into the centuries--past, present, and future--and around the world; and

WHEREAS, We believe with John W. Gardner that of all problems of education, reading stands first; therefore, be it

Resolved, That in the private sector of the home we shall do our utmost to enable children, from their earliest years, to grow up in an atmosphere where the reading of books is treated as a right and natural element of living; and be it further

Resolved, That in the public sector we shall support the passage of all measures and support all programs to enable children to gain the skill most essential to a satisfying and productive life--the skill of reading; and be it further

Resolved, That to this end we shall put an end to the ancient torture known as the Dick and Jane readers, a torture that still prevails in many a school, and instead provide all children with the kinds of reading materials that light and delight the mind.